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The Web of Life

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The Web of Life

By the 1870's Iowa had been settled by a colorful cross section of people, both native-born and foreign. They came from all sections of the Union—New England, the Middle States, the South, and the Old North West, as well as from many foreign lands. They brought with them the customs, traditions, and religion of their homeland and observed them in their new homes in Iowa. Since these dealt with their everyday life, and since local editors were frequent recorders of their activities, they provide an interesting glimpse of life in Iowa a century ago.

There were many fields of a cultural nature in which Iowa was forging ahead. The public lyceum and the old singing school had been a part of the heritage of the Hawkeye State since Territorial days. The steadily mounting interest in music could be attributed in part to such groups as the Welsh and particularly the Germans, who had settled in Iowa in large numbers. On June 17, 1869, the *Iowa Voter* (Knoxville) noted that the first state convention of music teachers and musicians would be held at Iowa City from July 27 to 30. The four-day state convention of a music group, meeting for the first time, is indicative

of the importance music held in many people's minds. The addition of music to the school curriculum was slow in coming to Iowa, hence this first stirring on a state-wide scale becomes significant.

While Civil War songs and the melodies of such bards as Stephen Foster and George F. Root were popular with all Iowans, some new ones were coming to the forefront in 1869, namely, "Love Among the Roses," "Up in a Balloon," and "Shoe Fly, Don't Bother Me." The following year, in 1870, Iowa songsters could exercise their vocal chords on "Package of Old Love Letters," "Flirting in the Twilight," and "Take Me Back Home Again." This was the period of the Minstrels, and although the fabulous Christy had died in 1862, their songs had become strongly entrenched in the public mind.

Since music played an important role in the development of culture in Iowa it should be noted that the songs of the period serve as an index to the changing times through which the state was passing. Such words as love and romance, moonlight and flirting, would be common musical themes in any age. In the transition from the 1860's to the 1870's Iowans learned songs dealing with the many exciting new inventions such as the railroad, the telegraph, the balloon, and the telephone. One of the common exhibitions during the 1860's which was to dazzle and thrill Iowans long after the 1870's had passed, was the balloon

ascension usually held at county fairs or similiar crowd-drawing events. On October 31, 1867, the *Weekly Oskaloosa Herald* declared:

Prof. Wilber, the "sky-flier" who ascended in a balloon from the Fair Ground at this place, made an attempt to reach the clouds, *via* a balloon during the Horse Fair at Ottumwa, but failed to clear the fence. Another attempt was more successful as regards height, but the unlucky wight was dropped in the river, where he received a good ducking and narrowly escaped drowning. If he breaks his neck once or twice he will learn to keep on his proper level.

Not all balloonists were as lucky as "Prof. Wilber." When DeHaven's Circus was playing at McGregor in the summer of 1870 they featured a young balloonist as a part of their show. A fatal ascent was recorded in the *Tipton Advertiser* of June 3, 1870:

The balloonist of DeHaven's circus made an ascent, Monday evening, about 7 o'clock at McGregor, Iowa, and sailed off in the direction of Prairie du Chien. When about half way across the river the balloon dropped to the water and the aeronaut becoming frightened, left the car and struck out for the shore, but soon gave out, sank and was drowned within sixty feet of a boat that had started to his rescue.

The attaches of DeHaven's circus raised \$1,000 for the mother of the young man drowned by the collapsing of the balloon and its fall into the river at McGregor, Iowa.

There were plenty of instances recorded in the

press to illustrate the dangers of balloon ascensions. Perhaps the most thrilling had to do with the two Englishmen who set out in their balloon and ascended to the "sickening" height of "eight miles above the earth." The excitement of an Iowan reading the account of this perilous exploit in 1869 must have equaled that of the millions who remained transfixed to their television sets during the moon landings of 1969:

The steersman comes down into the car; he sees his comrade in a swoon, and feels his own senses failing him.

He saw at once that life and death hung upon a few moments. He seized, or tried to seize, the valve in order to let out a portion of the gas. His hands are purple with the intense cold—they are paralyzed—they will not respond to his will. He seized the valve with his teeth, it opened a little—once, twice, thrice. The balloon began to descend. Then the swooned marksman returned to consciousness and saw the steersman standing before him. He looked at his instrument; they must have been nearly eight miles up; but now the barometer was rising rapidly—the balloon was descending. Brandy was used. They had been higher above the earth than mortal man or any other living being had ever been before. One minute more of inaction—of compulsory inaction—on the part of the steersman, whose senses were failing him and the air-ship with its intensely rarified gas, would have been floating unattended, with two corpses in the wide realm of space.

There were many other manifestations of culture in Iowa a century ago. In addition to the schools and churches, Iowa enjoyed both professional and homespun amusements. The more pop-

ulous centers had their own Opera Houses, their lyceums, and their theaters. They could also depend on the better circuses, carnivals, and animal shows frequenting their towns. The smaller communities, on the other hand, either had to hie themselves off to the larger cities, content themselves with second- and third-rate circuses and entertainers, or resort to their own homespun amusements. Among the latter the most popular were spelling bees, debates, and oratorical contests, usually held in one of the local schools. On February 5, 1870, the *Grand Junction Head-Light* recorded:

Spelling schools and debating clubs afford an opportunity for mental culture during the long winter evenings. "Oak Grove Debating Club," in every sense of the word, is a good society. Debates are held every Thursday evening and are always interesting. Teachers from adjoining districts contribute much to the interest of these occasions as they are men of liberal culture, educated at some of the time-honored institutions of the Eastern States. The question for the next debate is,

Resolved, That the pen has exerted greater influence than the sword.

Many Iowa communities, large and small, had their own bands and even small orchestras in 1869. They also could boast their own glee clubs, men's choruses, and men's quartets. On January 29, 1869, the *Iowa Age* (Clinton) noted:

"Maennerchor."—Wednesday evening at the German Concert we found out the meaning of this word. It means

a splendid set of good looking singers. The concert was really superb. Clinton and Lyons together, can beat the world in concerting. We wish we had more space to notice the entertainment.

Since Clinton had its own German Turnverein it is not surprising that it should become a center of social activity. On February 5, 1869, the *Iowa Age* reported:

Masquerade.—The German Turnverein Society of this city will give a Grand Masquerade Ball at Spencer Hall on Tuesday the 9th instant. Tickets are put at one dollar per couple. A gala time is anticipated.

Among the professional groups to visit Clinton was the Thompson & Parkhurst Troupe. The *Iowa Age* of January 29, 1869, records:

The Thompson & Parkhurst Troupe.—The entertainment given by this troupe at Union Hall on Tuesday evening, was well attended. The singing was excellent. The fun, first-class.—The burlesque on the Hutchinsons [nationally famous singers] decidedly rich. Long may the Thompson & Parkhurst troupe wave, and not give Clinton the go-by when they are traveling hitherward.

Dances were one of the most common forms of entertainment. The following gay affair at Perry was recorded in the *Grand Junction Head-Light* of February 10, 1870:

The Perry Dance.—On Monday evening an inauguration dance was held at Hanly's Hall in Perry, about fifty couples being present and entering into the pleasures of the occasion. Delegations were on hand from all the lower [railroad] stations and from this city, but the ladies from

Adel were unanimously voted the handsomest, gayest, nattiest dressed of all, and Bro. Atwood can tender them our invitation to come up and see us on the first of March, when a social will be held at the Ashley. We hear that the thumper beneath the "weskit" of a D[es Moines] V[alley] R. R. route agent was wrecked by the bright eyes of an Adelite. The music for the occasion was furnished by an Italian band.

Editors always waxed enthusiastic about such local functions. The *Grand Junction Head-Light* of February 5, 1870, looked back nostalgically at one exciting function at the county seat:

Calico Sociable.—On Thursday evening the Jefferson Quadrille Club held a calico sociable at Gallagher's Hall, bringing out an attendance of about forty couples of young Jeffersonians, with a representation from this city. We were there—veni, vidi, but didn't vici to any extent that we know of, "hoofing" it through a waltz or two with all the pleasures imaginable. Some of the costumes were more than stunning—instance the overflowing neckties of Loomis and Vandercook, as lively bricks as ever waded through waltz or schottische, while LeGore and Ellis and others appeared in calico from top to bottom. Altogether the party was an enjoyable affair, and our straying back to such pleasant quarters may safely be expected.

By the 1870's many of the smaller circuses had gone defunct and their acts, if worthwhile, were taken over by larger companies. Illustrative of the attitude of some editors is the following from the *Sioux City Weekly Times* of August 10, 1872:

Itinerant Traveling Shows.—Our city seems to be cursed with an annual incubus—it is either grasshoppers, hail storms, drought or a circus. The latter is generally the most objectionable, because the most unscrupulous and demoralizing. Highly colored bills announcing feats never performed, and pictures of animals that only exist in the fervid imagination of the managers, serve to attract crowds.

We now revert to this subject in order to warn the people of one of the most worthless institutions traveling under the name of a circus that we know of. We refer to Conklin Bros., advertised to show here next week.

This show was scraped up from the odds and ends of a recently defunct circus, and to galvanize or give the shebang some appearance of life, Yankee Robinson, the celebrated showman was promised about one third of the receipts to allow his name to be connected with it.

The same editor extracted some of the derogatory remarks of his brethren in other towns which must have proved highly embarrassing to "Conklin Bros. Circus:"

The press of neighboring towns where "Conklin Bros. Circus" have performed, are unsparing in their denunciations of it, warning the hotel people to beware of entertaining the fellows connected with it, and advising people not to be duped into throwing their money away by attending it. We call upon the mayor to enforce the law by collecting the \$200.00 license fee called for by our city ordinances, and thus retain in the city a portion of the money out of which they may swindle the credulous.

The side shows connected with these circuses are pitfalls where the unwary and innocent are eased of their surplus money.

Pratt, the agent of the circus, is known as a street corner vender of would-be erasive soaps, and the circus he represents is about as slippery, unreliable and worthless as his tongue.

Save your dimes by keeping away from the circus humbug.

Our exchanges along the route between here and California, where this misnamed circus is going to, will do well to be sparing of paid for favorable puffs. It ought to be discountenanced everywhere and by everybody.

Not all circuses were considered bad and the reputable ones were warmly welcomed in Iowa towns. Such a one was the MILES ORTON & Co.'s *Quinquupartite Combination Shows!* On June 3, 1869, the *Tipton Advertiser* carried a full column advertisement, a portion of which is reproduced herewith:

The Great Mastodon
of 1869

The Proprietors beg leave to announce to the lovers of amusements, that they have, at an enormous expense, organized a STRICTLY FIRST-CLASS COMPANY, comprising the very best talent to be found, during six months careful search. They have procured New Wagons, New Canvas, New Properties, and everything New, on a scale of magnificence heretofore unknown in the history of ancient or modern amusements.

The Superb
EQUESTRIAN AND ACROBAT TROUPE

Attached to this circus, comprise the most talented American and European male and female Artists known in the profession; it being the aim of the Proprietors, regardless

of cost, to present in every department of the Combination, the most finished and artistic performance ever seen in America.

Mr. Miles Orton,

The Champion Rider of the Universe, will appear at each performance in his great Sensational Pirouette Act, carrying his infant son CLAUDE in daring and difficult attitudes.

M'LE CAROLINE

The young, gifted and daring Equestrienne, from La Cirque, Paris. Her grace, personal beauty and dash, have never been equalled, and she is universally acknowledged to be the reigning Queen of the Arena.

MISS IRENE,

MISS VIRGINIA,

MISS JESSIE,

M'LE ELECTRA,

AND MRS. MILES ORTON,

ALL LADY EQUESTRIANS.

THE LAMONT BROTHERS

NEWTON, ALBERT AND WILLIAM,

In their daring feats of Triple Trapeze, Horizontal and Parallel Bars, Batoute and Aerial Leaps.

During the long winter months Iowa rivers and ponds offered a wonderful opportunity for skating. On January 1, 1869, the *Clinton Iowa Age* recorded the pleasure Iowans took in this sport:

Skating, so far this season has not been so good as our young friends could have desired, yet we have noticed several parties with skates in hand and merry, laughing faces, evidencing a good time notwithstanding the very unpromising state of the ice. On Saturday afternoon last

we had the pleasure of passing an hour or more upon the park near the Clinton Lumber Company's mill. A goodly company were present, and, though not got up for the occasion, the ladies were most attractive, and yielded themselves to the fascinations of the occasion with bewitching grace. We regret not being well enough acquainted with our fair young friends to allude to the perfection attained by them in this healthful exercise, and we noticed several deserving special commendation. The costumes were appropriate, and showed their beautiful figures to a fascinating and magnificent advantage. Miss H. was particularly attractive in a plaid worsted walking suit, and the exercise brightening her cheeks and eyes, enhancing, if such were possible, her usual beauty. Another young lady, an excellent skater, in brown dress, looped and ruffled at the side, moved with peculiar grace and ease. In short, all were attractive, as how could they be otherwise? We would wish to see a more general participation in this healthy recreation. W.

Except for the fact that you needed a horse and sled, sleighing parties were just as popular as skating. On February 4, 1869, the *Tama County Republican* declared:

Hard Joking.—A party of some dozen ambitious but thoughtless Misses not a thousand miles from Anamosa, took it into their heads, a week or so ago, to go on a sleighing excursion to a neighboring town, some eighteen miles distant. Accordingly the necessary outfit was made ready and the services of two young men secured for the purpose of taking charge of the team. When some seven or eight miles from the end of their journey, the young men aforesaid jumped out to walk,—the weather being somewhat cold, and the girls drove on, leaving their at-

tendants to foot the entire distance. The young men kept their own counsel, however; and, after rest and refreshments for themselves and horses, quietly hitched up and drove home, leaving the smart young ladies to the enjoyment of such reflections as this two-sided practical joke would naturally suggest.

In almost every phase of human activity—around the family hearth, at church socials and school picnics, at the circus, the theater, or the local fair, in every conceivable homespun amusement, Iowans found plenty of opportunity to divert themselves. And most newspaper editors were unusually adept in recording the passing parade for their readers and handing them down to posterity through the files of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN